

THE LINDEN TREE IN 'THE DEAD' BY JAMES JOYCE¹

Iciar Álvarez Pérez, Univ. Complutense de Madrid
Email: iciar.alvrz@gmail.com

Abstract: James Joyce uses in his short story 'The Dead', included in the collection *Dubliners* (1914), different literary motives that contribute to construct the subject of the story, which is not other than the fragility that exists between death and life. Among these motives there is the Linden tree that probably Joyce adapted from the song 'Lindenbaum' written by Franz Schubert and included in the song cycle *Winter Journey* (1828). This article attempts to investigate the parallelisms that exist between both works of art and to explain how Joyce succeeds in creating the necessary atmosphere that masterly illustrates the subject of the story.

Keywords: Literary motif, Linden tree, death, *Winter Journey*, 'The Dead', James Joyce.

Título en español: The Linden Tree en "The Dead", por James Joyce

Resumen: James Joyce utiliza en su relato 'Los muertos', incluido en la colección *Dublineses* (1914), una serie de motivos literarios que contribuyen a construir el tema del relato, que no es otro que la frágil línea divisoria que existe entre la vida y la muerte. Entre estos motivos se encuentra el árbol de tilo, que muy probablemente Joyce tomó de la canción 'Lindenbaum' incluida en el ciclo de canciones *Viaje de Invierno* (1828) de Franz Schubert. Este artículo pretende indagar en los paralelismos que existen entre ambas obras y demostrar como Joyce consigue crear la atmósfera necesaria para ilustrar con brillantez el tema del relato.

Palabras clave: motivo literario, árbol de tilo, muerte, *Viaje de Invierno*, 'Los muertos', James Joyce.

Joyce accurateness when writing the stories of *Dubliners* (1914) is such that he manages to portray the city of Dublin, in the words of Ezra Pound, "as it presumably is ... He gives the things as they are, not only for Dublin but for every city ..." (ELLMAN 1987: 173). Joyce wrote the stories of *Dubliners* with the purpose, in his own words, of writing a chapter in the history of his native country. In this sense, the city of Dublin represented for Joyce the center of the modern paralyzed world.

Due to Joyce consciousness and detail when writing his stories, Ezra Pound, at that time a literary critic for 'The Egoist', recognized Joyce's talent even when he was an unknown writer when he published *Dubliners* in 1914. Pound praised his "rigorous selection of detail", which made him worthy of "a very definite place among English-contemporary

¹ **Date of reception:** 15 June 2011
Date of acceptance: 2 December 2011

prose writers.” (ELLEMAN 1987: 174). Joyce’s condensed and modern prose, in which there is no place for superfluity, does not allow to leave any detail to chance, whereas at the same time, coincidences do not exist in his narrative. Thus, the symbols and motifs that the Irish writer uses in *Dubliners* are always endowed with meaning; moreover, these meanings are related one to another constructing the fabric that makes *Dubliners* a radiography of Joyce’s hometown.

In this regard, Joyce carefully constructed his stories with a precise selection of autobiographical elements, a fact that in the case of ‘The Dead’ is sharply shown with the love affair that his wife Nora had in the past with a young man, whom suffering from tuberculosis, left his room in order to sing Nora a song under the Irish rain even when doctors had forbidden him to leave his bed. This action had a few days after the tragical consequence of the death of the young man.

Nora confessed Joyce her story, and the Irish writer, an extremely jealous, stubborn and wandering lover, just as he defined himself in his love letters to his wife, conceived the plot of his last *Dubliners*’ story. But there is not only autobiography in ‘The Dead’ but a masterly construction of characters, such as it happens with the protagonist of the story, Gabriel Conroy, whom according to Stanislaus Joyce was a mixture between his brother James and their father; however, the protagonist of the story presumably takes its name from the novel *Gabriel Conroy* (1876), written by the American writer Bret Harte, from which Joyce seems also to take the rhythmic description of the snow that appears at the beginning of Harte’s novel: “Snow. Everywhere ... “ A description that turns ultimate at the end of the story of ‘The Dead’. But the protagonist’s name may also be associated with biblical connotations that easily remind to the angel Gabriel; therefore, the character of Gabriel Conroy turns to be a complex construction that gives meaning to the events happened in the last story of *Dubliners*.

It is noticeable how in Joyce’s fiction all elements are carefully selected to reflect the city of Dublin that the writer wants to portray: from the beginning of ‘The Dead’ with a party that shows the hospitality of Irish people, music and folk songs that enliven the night and are crucial for the development of the story, the mood and idiosyncrasies of *Dubliners* contrasting with references to the territories of the west of Ireland, the atmosphere and the cold weather with the symbolism of the snow falling on dead and alive, and of course the subject that runs throughout all the story, which is none other than the interactions between death and life.

Thus, each element of the story and each circumstance that happens in ‘The Dead’ and in the rest of the stories are chosen and articulated according to symbolic meanings that in sum make of *Dubliners* “a book about human fate as well as a series of sketches of Dublin.” (STALLWORTHY 2000: 2232). And in the case of ‘The Dead’, this sketch of Dublin achieves a performative function, in which Joyce, according to Margot Norris, “overlaps drama and fiction while interpolating painting, picture, sculpture, and music as well by giving the narration itself, the story’s ‘telling.’” (NORRIS 2003: 218) Therefore, the narration of ‘The Dead’ and most of *Dubliners* could be understood as an artistic *mis en scène* from which different discourses and interpretations emerge in only a few pages per story. In this sense, Joyce’s ability to condense the narrative and to use the English language economically but effectively should be highlighted.

Following the style of the Norwegian playwright Ibsen, one of Joyce's influences, the Irish writer takes "his analytic method ... to the fullest extent, and into the comparatively short space of two days in the life of all life historical characters is compressed." (ELLEMAN 1987: 179). These words were written by Joyce in the *Forenightly Review* about Ibsen; nonetheless, this description responds either to the intensity that Joyce achieves with 'The Dead', a story in which the life attitudes of the protagonists are condensed in a few pages.

But Joyce's admiration for Ibsen goes far beyond the mere use of language: what the young Irish writer sought, just as the Norwegian playwright does in his work, is to evoke through the use of symbols and verbal images the 'unseen reality' that there is behind the prosperous and complacent bourgeois life. In this sense, it is Gabriel Conroy, the protagonist of 'The Dead', the one who awakes from this state of self-satisfaction when he learns that his wife, in the past, had loved another man who had the romantic and passionate nature that he lacks. And in order to provoke Gabriel's careful thoughts at the end of the story, which are presented as the classical Joycean epiphany, it is more than likely that Joyce used skillfully and subtly the literary motif of the linden tree found in the cycle of songs *Winter Journey* (1828) from Franz Schubert. The Linden tree, a new motif to the story is probably used in order to help to remove the thin line between life and death that exists along 'The Dead'.

Therefore, if the economy of language that Joyce uses in *Dubliners* is linked with the significance and symbolism that every detail has in the story, along with the interest and pleasure that music aroused in Joyce, who had a remarkable musical culture and also sang accompanied with the piano, it is more than possible that in the last pages of 'The Dead', when Gretta tells her husband Gabriel about how her former lover Michael Furey died, Joyce was inspired by the song cycle *Winter Journey*, specifically by the song number five entitled 'Der Lindenbaum', which gives a new motif to the story with its corresponding symbology that helps to reinforce and construct the theme of the 'The Dead'.

Then, the tree where Gretta's lover expresses his despair for the departure of her beloved, it is likely to be the same linden tree that Schubert used in his winter journey. However, it is true that Gretta never specifies what kind of tree is the one where her youth lover stood, so it may seem too adventurous to say that Joyce used the motif embodied in the lime tree of the *Winter Journey* and adapted it to 'The Dead' in order to strengthen the subject of the story. In fact, other interpretations such as the one of Norris suggest that Michael Furey is Gretta's Romeo "standing under the dripping tree that is the synecdoche of the Capulet orchard" (NORRIS 2003: 238).

Nonetheless, considering Joyce's use of musical references in his work and his desire of introducing innovation by using different kinds of language, along with the consciousness and detail with which the Irish writer manages the motives and symbols in 'The Dead', it is more than likely that the tree next to where Michael Furey stood is the same 'Lindenbaum' in which the devastated hero of the *Winter Journey* carved in its bark "So manches liebe Wort."²

If in Schubert's song the protagonist remembers the linden tree as a place that served him in the past as a shelter where he often confessed his longings and sufferings, Joyce instead

² A message of love

plays with 'Der Lindenbaum' song and uses it in a very particular way; he never mentions the song cycle or even Schubert, indeed, he prefers to use other musical pieces that allow the development of the narration and at the same time show the intimate knowledge that the Irish writer had of the musical culture of Dublin. Therefore, 'The Dead' also becomes a musical portrait of Joyce's hometown.

These songs include 'The Lass Aughtim', which is sung in the voice of a baritone invited to the party of the Morkan sisters. Gretta listens to the song in a state of melancholy while her husband Gabriel observes her thoughtfully. Later at the hotel, Gretta confesses him that the song was the one that her young lover used to sing for her. But her lover, a young man with the most romantic and passionate nature would end dying from Greta's loss of love. Thus, it is 'The Lass Aughtim' the song that boosts Gretta's narration and unleashes Gabriel Conroy's epiphany. So at what point of the story and how does Joyce introduce Schubert's 'Lindenbaum'? Precisely in Gretta's youth episode, in which the symbolism of the song helps to create the melancholic, romantic and passionate atmosphere necessary to understand the love story between Gretta and Michael.

In Gretta's story, the portrait of her young lover Michael Furey inevitably reminds to the hero of the *Winter Journey*, whom in Gretta's words died for him: "I think he died for me." (JOYCE 1981: 238). Michael Furey is described as the perfect romantic lover who dies young: he is a seventeen year-old teenager that comes from Oughterard, a small village in the west of Ireland. But Michael lives in a hostel in Galway, also in the west and where young Gretta and her grandmother live.

It is not by chance that Joyce sets the action of the story in the west of Ireland, since this area unlike the east and the city of Dublin from which Gabriel comes from, contains a dangerous and dark element in the Irish imagination that triggers in the mind of the correct protagonist of 'The Dead' connotations of primitivism and savagery. In the words of Richard Elleman: "During most of the story, the west of Ireland is connected in Gabriel's mind with a dark and rather painful primitivism, an aspect of historical country which he has steadily abjure by going off to the continent." (ELLEMAN 1987 : 178).

In this regard, Gabriel, rejecting the west cannot avoid answering to Miss Ivors' question, Gabriel's fellow at University and a fervent supporter of the Irish culture, that if Gretta comes from Councat at the western part of the country, with a terse: "Her people are". It seems, therefore, that Gabriel Conroy wants to negate Greta's past in the west, since "the west is savagery," while "to the east and the south lie people who drink wine and wear galoshes." (ELLEMAN 1987 : 178). Gabriel, as a good Dubliner likes to wear galoshes to protect himself against the snow, a fact that causes the laughter of his wife Gretta, from whom it is not difficult to guess a more determined and passionate nature since her origins are set in the west part of the country.

But going back to the romance between Gretta and Michael Furey, which takes place in Galway at the west of Ireland, it seems possible that in a primitive and savage land like the west can emerge a passionate relationship and a loving devotion such as Gretta's and Michael's had one for the other.

Michael Furey, a young sensitive and delicate man with expressive black eyes is fond of singing. Gretta remembers his good voice and of course the way he sang 'The Lass Aughtim', a song that again refers to the western territories since Aughtim is a small town

near Galway. The song lyrics have a special meaning in the story because they narrate how a peasant woman seduced and abandoned by Lord Gregory calls to his door with her newborn son in her arms and begs him to be received into the house.

Michael Furray does not call to Gretta's door but throws pebbles against her window, and when her beloved appears she begs him to return to his hostel in order to not to get sick under the rain. But the young lover says that he does not want to live if Gretta leaves Galway in order to join the convent in Dublin. As the hero of the *Winterreise*, Michael Furey is a romantic who sings his sorrows next to the linden tree found in Gretta's grandmother garden. And just as it happens in Schubert's song, Joyce sets his story in a cold and rainy landscape that represents winter on one side and in the other portrays the desolate and tragic feelings from both characters.

While the hero of the *Winterreise*, who abandons the linden tree that sheltered and gave him company, does not approach her beloved and simply starts his journey to the regions of death and darkness; Michael Furray, on the contrary, stops at Gretta's house to express his desire of dying. He seems unwilling to abandon the tree in Gretta's garden, but eventually he goes away and begins his winter's journey that will last only a week until he dies in his Galway's hostel and he is finally buried in his homeland, Oughterard. On the other hand, no one knows the fate of the protagonist of the *Winter Journey*, whom at the end of the poem expresses his desire to stay forever with the organ grinder; but this desire cannot be much better than death, because what probably waits for the unfortunate hero of the *Winterreise* is the certainty of a death in life.

But a death in life is what Gabriel Conroy realizes to have been living in his privileged bourgeois life. The protagonist of 'The Dead', thus, begins also his particular *Winter Journey* at the end of the story when he realizes the vagueness between the line of life and death and how there are dead people alive and alive people dead.

Michael Furray is dead but he is alive in Gretta's mind when she listens to the song 'The Lass Aghrim', and when Gabriel knows the existence of Gretta's young lover he cannot help feeling jealous of someone dead. But this jealousy goes beyond the love story between Gretta and Michael and is in fact a recognition that he, a well-respected language teacher from his privileged position and bourgeois nature, lacks the necessary passion to experience the feeling of love in all of its intensity.

In this sense, Michael Furey, a modest young man from the west part of the country, with no education and a job at the gas company contrasts with the privileged position of Gabriel, a professor of languages and a role model in the Dublin society. At first, Gabriel seems to take refuge in his social position in order to underestimate Gretta's love story: he asks her for Michael's occupation and he assumes that the boy died from tuberculosis. To some extent, he attempts to assert his superiority over the dead young man.

But Gretta's emphatic words: "I think he died for me" (JOYCE 1981: 238) make him understand that his wife, who has been married to him for years and whom he realizes he barely knows anything, has had a love experience with an intensity that he has never known. And it was not with him but with Michael Furey, the boy employed in the gas company that again responds to Joyce's use of symbolism, since Michael Furey, a gas worker, is in contact with the heat and therefore with passion, making him capable of love unlike the exemplary university professor of languages.

In this sense, it is remarkable how Joyce, as Margot Norris suggests, “beautifully draws the parallel between the husband who aborts the very endangerment from which he fantasizes heroically rescuing his wife, by making her, and himself, wear galoshes, while her tubercular lover stood in the rain mourning the loss of his love- ‘I think he died for me’” (NORRIS 2003: 226). But when Gabriel finally knows about Michael Furey’s story, “he saw himself as a ludicrous figure, acting as a pennyboy for his aunts, a nervous well-meaning sentimentalist, orating to vulgarious and idealising his own clownish lusts, the pitiable factious fellow he had caught a glimpse of in the mirror” (Joyce 1981: 238). And it is precisely at this moment when Gabriel’s epiphany begins. But to understand the protagonist ‘moment of vision’, which includes the limitations and the fragility of human ideals, the reader should pay attention to Gabriel’s character throughout the story. Gabriel Conroy, from which the reader knows that he is a man with studies and with a good social position that somehow plays the role of the hero in the party of the Morkan sisters, who eagerly wait for the arrival of their favorite nephew; he is at the same time an insecure man who does not know how to deal with some of the social encounters he has from the beginning of the story, such as his awkward conversation with Lily, the maid of the Morkan’s sisters, to whom he gives a substantial tip after having asked her some unfortunate questions, or as well as his clash of ideas with Miss Ivors, with whom he feels uncomfortable and threatened. And of course his inability to deal with his own emotions and understand those of his wife Gretta.

Therefore, Gabriel is not the bright individual perfectly adapted to the modern society in Dublin, but neither he is the great misunderstood and marginalized artist. He is therefore an ordinary man trapped between both sides; he suffers a partial alienation but at the same time realizes that his life is not so far from death. Both states, death and life are related one to another more than Gabriel had ever thought. In the words of Patrick Parrinder, Gabriel Conroy “has ‘an out of body’ experience in which he travels in spirit to the region of ‘the dead’, and then westward to the snow-covered Irish landscape” (PARRINDER 1984: 67).

Gabriel Conroy is about to travel to the region of death, he undertakes his winter journey, which in the words of the narrator is set to be at the west of the country: “The time had come for him to set out his journey westward.” (JOYCE 1987: 241).

Gabriel’s final journey to the west has been interpreted in different ways by critics: from the protagonist’s concession and the sacrifice of his ideals in order to approach the level of primitivism, impulsiveness and wilderness embodied in what the west represents, to a journey into the past and death. The west, therefore, seems to represent both death and life, but can also be understood as nationalism, which according to Joyce and his ideas about Ireland, represents a territory that cannot be far away from death, which is the same destiny that awaits the protagonist of the *Winter Journey* and presumably the protagonist of ‘The Dead’.

But Gabriel Conroy has not lost his beloved, in fact it seems he never had her, but once his convictions and personal world has crumbled, he realizes that he cannot continue embracing any of his past ideals. Gabriel Conroy’s fate is open, the reader does not know if after his epiphany he will be able to embrace the danger and intensity of the west, or otherwise, due to his reflective nature and the revelation of his epiphany, he will accept life stoically and remain as a living dead.

This close relationship between death and life at the end of the story is highlighted by the snow that heavily falls in Dublin, both on dead and alive. The snow is present when Gabriel Conroy tries to understand the love story between his wife and Michael Furey; he assumes that what Michel felt for Gretta must had been closer to love, whereas he has never been able to feel such a passion for any woman. While Gabriel reflects on these issues Gretta sleeps in the hotel room, he looks out of the window and sees the white snow covering indiscriminately all the landscape. This image reminds Gabriel the fragility and mortality of human beings: "His soul swooned slowly as I heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead" (JOYCE 1981: 241).

Snow, therefore, falls equally on Gabriel, Gretta and the young Michael Furey buried in Outerghard. At this point Gabriel feels the dissolution of his world and approaches 'the region of the death' where Michael and the *Winter Journey* hero are. It must be pointed out how snow is somewhat a more powerful motif than Gretta's linden tree, because it alludes directly to the close relationship between death and life and acts also as a symbol of the paralysis that the protagonist feels, who realizes the triviality of his words in the speech at the party of his aunts Morkan, where he proclaimed the necessity to continue living apart from the memory of the dead, which proves to be impossible at the end of the story.

But this paralysis is extended to everyone in the story, just as it happens with Gretta, who is closely connected with death since she cannot remove the pain of the loss of her former lover. Thus, death occurs everyday and the paralysis is spread everywhere just as snow covers all Ireland:

Yes, the newspapers were right: was snow general all over Ireland. It was falling on every part of the dark central plain, on the treeless hills, falling softly upon the bog of allen and, farther westward, softly falling into the dark mutinous Shannon waves. It was falling, too, upon every part of the lonely churchyard on the hill where Michael Furey lay buried." (JOYCE 1981: 242).

Finally, it must be mentioned that the snow is part of the winter atmosphere where darkness, rain and cold reign. It seems that just as in the *Winter Journey*, this atmosphere is closer to the region of the death, whereas at the same time expresses the inner paralysis of the protagonists, whom whether by the loss of love or the loss of moral convictions have seen their world destroyed.

Nonetheless, snow is also the symbol of clarity, and it is in its presence when the protagonist of 'The Dead' experiences his revelation or epiphany and realizes that life is not so far away from death as he believed before. The same will happen to the young Hans Castorp in *The Magic Mountain* (1924), whom in an episode called 'Snow', suffers a higher order revelation where the beautiful and sinister are united just as life and death are.

It seems, therefore, that snow is the central motif of the story where death and life are connected. But returning to Schubert's 'Lindenbaum', Gretta's grandmother linden tree is also a part of the set of motives that contribute to reinforce the theme of the story. Whereas the 'Lindenbaum' in the *Winter Journey* is first presented as a shelter for the tortured lover, the tree also hides a meaning of death that Joyce uses

in 'The Dead' just as Thomas Mann does in his famous novel *The Magic Mountain*. In Schubert's *Winter Journey*, the linden tree is the place where the protagonist confesses his joys and sorrows; it is then a symbol of life, but when the hero begins his journey, the tree seems to encourage the protagonist to find a place to rest eternally "Und immer hör ich's rauschen / 'Du fändest Ruhe dort'"³ But the traveler continues his journey and refuses to rest next to his beloved tree. On the contrary, Michael Furey remains next to Gretta's tree, and it is only by the insistence of her beloved that he finally leaves his shelter, but only to die some days after at his room in a Galway's hostel. Therefore, the suffering of the young romantic stops and he finds eternal rest in the primitive western lands, a symbol both of death and a new life.

'Der Lindenbaum' lies then both in the regions of life and death, just like Gabriel Conroy, Gretta, Michael Furey and the rest of the characters in the story do. They all move from one area to the other during the development of the narration. In this regard, Joyce makes a skillful use of symbols in 'The Dead', since he contrasts cold and death with warmth and life; for example, Michael's Furey occupation is in contact with gas, a clear symbol of a passionate and loving nature connected with the world of feelings, whereas in Gabriel's mind the question that he addressed to Gretta on a frosty night: "Is the fire hot?", awakes on him comfortable and sentimental sensations. On the other hand, this warmth contrasts with the cold and darkness of death and the extended paralysis to all characters in the story, which is well reflected for example in Dublin's weather and especially in the image of Michael Furey under the rain and darkness of Galway.

It is this image of a young Michael, desperate under Dublin's rain for the departure of his beloved, the one which coincides with the start of the journey of the protagonist of the *Winter Journey*. However, it is not clear at the end of 'The Dead' who is the authentic romantic and alienated hero of the story, because while the young Michael rests in peace in the west part of Ireland, it is Gabriel Conroy the one who prepares himself to start his winter journey once his personal universe has been destroyed and he cannot find anything else than a life in death.

In conclusion, in 'The Dead' the linden tree is one of the motives that illustrates the fragility of life and its proximity to death. But 'Der Lindenbaum' is not the only motif that portrays this idea, but others such as the snow falling incessantly on Ireland accomplish the same function. However, while in 'The Dead' the snow is the central motif that appears throughout all the story and has a special meaning at the end of the narration, it is the linden tree, by contrast, the one which is introduced in a more subtle and discreet way.

Occupying a second place, the linden tree adds complexity and beauty to the narration, while helps at the same time to construct the meaning of the story just as the rest of motives do. Therefore, Schubert's song, incorporated to the story when Gretta tells her husband Gabriel about her former lover Michael Furey, even "used to orchestrate and reiterate existing themes, without contributing new or vital links on thematic interpretations" (BOWEN 1974: II); helps to create the melancholic atmosphere necessary to comprehend the limitations of the human being and the thin line that separates death from life.

³ And still I hear it whisp'ring / You'll find your peace with me

In addition, both Michael Furey and Gabriel Conroy are candidates to rival with the desolation felt by the protagonist of the *Winter Journey*. Both characters, for different reasons, undertake their winter journey, which in the case of Michael ends with his life and in the case of Gabriel ends in the the western direction, which appears in 'The Dead' as a symbol of death and life, as well as wilderness and primitivism.

Therefore, in addition to the winter landscape that exists both in the song and the story, several parallelisms can be drawn between 'The Dead' from Joyce and Schubert's *Winter Journey*. While Joyce never mentions Schubert's 'Lindenbaum', it seems clear that the Irish writer was inspired by the Austrian composer's song to conceive the tragic fate of Michael Furey, who standing next to the linden tree, confesses Gretta his love for her and his desire of not living without her. Thus, Joyce's linden tree illustrates on one side the fragile line between life and death and in the other one provides complexity and beauty to the story of 'The Dead'.

REFERENCES

- BOWEN, Z. 1974. *Musical Allusions in the Works of James Joyce: early poetry through Ulysses*. Albany: State University of New York
- ELLMAN, R. 1987. "The backgrounds of 'the Dead'." *James Joyce: Dubliners and A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Ed. M, BEJA. London: Macmillan Education. 172-187.
- JOYCE, J. 1986. "Dubliners." *The Portable James Joyce*. Ed. H, LEVIN. New York: The Viking Press. 17-244.
- NORRIS, M. 2003. *Suspicious Readings of James Joyce's Dubliners*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press
- PARRINDER, P. 1984. *James Joyce*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- STALLWORTHY, J. 2000. "James Joyce (1882-1841)." *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. Ed. M.H. ABRAMS. New York: W.W Norton. 2231-2313.